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ABSTRACT

The historical background of the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) movement in the United States is recounted, and its relationship to contemporary trends in second language education is given. The ESP movement refers to the area of English-as-a-Second-Language education that focuses on the learner's purpose in acquiring the language, including English for Academic Purposes and Study Skills and recently, English for Teaching Assistants. The movement's early origins are traced to England in the 1920's with the initial growth surge of ESP course offerings occurring in the 1960's. Significant writings specifically on ESP and related developments in other fields of linguistics are reviewed, including aspects of sociolinguistic theory and practice, the evolution of a variety of language teaching approaches and methodologies, the use of authentic materials, integration of language and content instruction, special language needs of the workplace, and English language needs developing from rapid economic development in the Middle East. The reasons for differences between the British and American movements are examined briefly, and the form taken by the American movement when it caught on in the early 1980's is described. The growth, future prospects, and links of the ESP movement in the United States to trends in second language education are discussed. A brief bibliography is included. (MSE)

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THE AMERICAN EVOLUTION OF ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide an historical overview of the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) movement in the United States, and its relationship to contemporary trends in second language education. Much of the attention on the movement's past focuses on its British and Third World roots. No study to date has examined the growth of ESP in the United States. Yet a sense of the past and ESP's position in second language education add direction and unity to the profession.

The ESP movement refers to the distinctive area of ESL education that focuses on the learner's purpose in acquiring a language. ESP courses teach language for a particular communicative purpose, within certain settings and sociolinguistic contexts. The teacher selects vocabulary, structures and language functions with attention to how the learner intends to use the language, considering as well the types of interaction and register that are likely to be needed by the students. Then the teacher chooses materials and plans activities accordingly. Typically the ESP learner is an adult who has a particular professional or academic orientation; s/he works in business, medicine, science, law, engineering or is preparing to enter one of these fields through study at a university. English

for Academic Purposes and Study Skills, and recently, English for Teaching Assistants are considered part of the ESP field.

Historical Origins

Widdowson (1983) traces the very beginning of the ESP movement to H. E. Palmer in the 1920's in Great Britain. In his work, Palmer said "a program of study depends on the aims of the students, that we cannot design a language course till we know about needs of the learner." The driving philosophy behind the ESP movement is of course the development and execution of a curriculum especially suited to the needs of a particular group of learners -- defined by a profession or vocational unit such as medical personnel, scientists, business persons, or adults intent upon entering an academic program at a university. However, Palmer's identification of the primary goal of the ESP movement did not coincide with a large movement toward ESP courses. The movement actually gained its impetus and had its initial growth surge forty years later in the 1960's. Swales (1984) pinpoints the start of the ESP movement in 1962 with Charles Barber's article "Some measurable characteristics of modern scientific prose.' Barber analysed the structural nature of scientific prose and suggested that the progressive tenses were not frequently used. As a result of his study, set in the sixties at the height of the influence of the structuralists, teachers like John Swales decided to eliminate the study of the progressive tenses from English as a Foreign Language courses for science students. This indicated a break with the tradition of the time which dictated the dutiful inclusion of the entire grammatical

system in courses for ESL/EFL students.

As in the case of Barber, the first work in ESP was directed toward science and technology. In 1965 A. J. Herbert published The Structure of Technical English which dealt with the special problems associated with language for science and the expression of technical facts and ideas. In keeping with the structuralist tradition of the time, Herbert's book taught grammatical structures using examples taken from engineering. Herbert was a language teacher who wrote his text with assistance from colleagues in the college of engineering, an early example of interdisciplinary cooperation inspired by ESP. Herbert clearly states in his introduction that the purpose of the text is to teach language rather than engineering.

Allen and Widdowson's (1978) English in Physical Science follows the functional notional approach that "learning a language is not merely a matter of learning sentence patterns and vocabulary but ... also involves an understanding of how people use these linguistic forms in order to communicate." (p. xi) It employs a cyclical presentation of simpler to more complex subject matter, and favors problem-solving and the development of critical thinking rather than mechanical drills and pattern practice. Its goals are to teach neither language nor content in isolation, but to integrate both in meaningful communication.

Subsequent developments in the areas of sociolinguistic theory and practice in the mid sixties and seventies revealed the relationship between the linguistic form and the communicative function of the language. New importance was placed on the situation, setting, speaker's and listener's background and frame

of reference. A plethora of new language teaching methodologies such as TPR, community language learning, suggestology, silent way with an emphasis on communicative language skills emerged during this period. Coinciding with the changes in teaching methodology was a tremendous demand for EFL courses. Students were willing and able to spend large sums of money on language courses. A competitive situation developed, and innovative programs that promised results were embraced. The new group of eager learners had little time to waste and wanted to learn English suited for their specific needs. In general, ESP learners to this day have a very clear idea of why they are studying English and a great impatience with studying anything that they perceive as irrelevant to their needs.

In its attempt to unify Europe's system of awarding university credit, and in response to the functional-notional approach to syllabus design in language teaching, the Council of Europe developed a unit-credit system for teaching English based on the functional-notional approach. Subsequently the Council of Europe completed a project that developed English teaching programs and functional-notional materials for forty-four occupational categories. The functional-notional approach lends itself well to ESP by selecting a limited amount of language functions for the learner to master. The syllabus designer chooses those functions most related to the learner's needs, and selects structures and vocabulary according to the level and needs of the student.

The learner-centered approach to language teaching also

plays a role in ESP instruction with its concentration on identifying and meeting learner's communicative needs and purposes.

The use of authentic materials, as advocated by second language educators such as Bernhardt (1988), is important in teaching ESP. Morrow (1977) defines authentic materials as "real language, produced by a real speaker for a real audience to convey a real message." These materials commonly are used in ESP courses to provide relevant and useful reading and listening matter that is culturally and linguistically rich. The authentic materials draw on the subject specific background knowledge of the ESP learner and thus facilitate comprehension of the text. Types of authentic materials used in ESP courses include excerpts from newspapers, professional journals, textbooks, unedited spontaneous conversations, technical videotapes, training films, and tapes of television shows.

ESP reflects as well the trend toward the integration of language and content instruction. Content-based instruction views language as a medium of instruction as well as a vehicle for communication. As such, motivation to learn about the subject is intertwined with the need to learn the language. The language is embedded in context that is important and meaningful to the ESP learner.

The special language needs of the workplace began to receive attention from language educators, particularly in the Third World and from the British Council. Occupational, vocational training programs in business and industry and in the medical and social services fields demanded special ESP courses tailored to their

particular needs.

Another interesting development in Great Britain gave initial impetus to the movement. In the late 1950s and early 60s, immigration from the Commonwealth reach a peak in Great Britain and prompted the introduction of the Commonwealth Immigrants Act in July 1962. Pilot projects for immigrant LEP workers in Ealing and Slough were initiated. The management and workers worked with curriculum developers to determine course content and company specific programs. The training sessions lasted ten to twelve weeks with daily instruction held onsite to minimize loss of production time.

Other areas of ESP that grew in the 1970s include English for Academic Purposes and English for Medical Personnel. Yorkey's (1970) text Study Skills for Students of ESL was one of the first in EAP. Great Britain saw some of the first courses in English for hospital workers in the early seventies.

The rapid economic development of the Middle East in the early 1970's brought an unprecedented proliferation of post-secondary English teaching programs there, directly related to the need to use English as a medium of instruction in Middle Eastern countries. In 1975, courses in scientific English were offered for the first time at the Faculty of Science in Kuwait University. By 1977, military academies, private language schools, airlines, universities throughout the Middle East, English Language Teaching Institutes all offered ESP courses, principally in English for Science and Technology.

Swales (1977) notes that the ESP component of programs in

the Middle East is influenced strongly by whether Americans or the British were involved in program development. The English were much more likely to include an ESP component in the curriculum than the Americans. This British Council, corresponding to the US Information Service's English Language Teaching Branch, has actively assisted in numerous teaching projects in Third World countries and included ESP components in these activities. Their funding for English teaching activities is vastly larger than the budget that the USIA allocates its teaching division. The figure that the British Council spends on English language teaching is reported to be ten times greater than that spent by the USIA.

The contrast in British and American support for the ESP movement can be attributed to fundamental differences in educational philosophy and systems. First, the British system of education favors early specialization and directs students toward a specific program early on in the instructional program. Examinations are offered in specific areas, and the entire thrust of the system promotes subject or professional specialization. In the United States, the liberal arts curriculum is cherished as the way to develop well-rounded, fullly educated individuals. Specialization is put off until the second or third year of college, when a major must be declared. Even when a major is declared, typically a full half of a student's coursework is devoted to liberal studies, or may be chosen from a wide array of electives. Americans favor a general preparation for college students, and stave off specialization for as long as possible. Even the primary testing instruments used nationally for college

admissions the SAT and GRE consist of English and Math components, although exams do exist in area specializations.

The American Evolution of ESP

In the United States, ESP caught on approximately ten to fifteen years after its start in Great Britain and the Third World. The first real evidence of ESP in America came in the early 1980's.
in America. One of the earliest indications of its growing appeal was the appearance of the ESP Journal in 1980, which drew upon the talents of British experts. Additionally, a conference was held in 1981 at Northeastern University on Foreign Languages for the Professions . The introduction to the proceedings (1981) gives credit to the President's Commission on Foreign Languages and International Studies for inspiring the conference. While the Commission's famous report (1979) Strength through Wisdom focused on the decline of language skills in the United States, it noted the need for professionally-linked foreign langauge courses. The Commission suggested that linguistic skills are a plus when combined with other professional knowledge in fields such as engineering, business, and nursing. The conference proceedings reported a rather surprising enthusiasm among participants for non-traditional foreign language study of applied language skills.

In 1982, Eastern Michigan University held the first annual Conference on Languages for Business and the Professions. It centered on Spanish, and was enthusiastically received and attended by approximately 200 advocates of applied language studies. The conference in 1983 expanded its coverage to

English, French, and German in addition to Spanish. Each year since then the conference has been repeated to include other languages for specific purposes. The Modern Language Association featured its first workshop on languages for specific purposes in New York in 1983, led by faculty from Eastern Michigan University (EMU). At the same time EMU developed a successful program in foreign languages and international trade in an effort to meet student demand and increase departmental enrollments. Other universities such as University of South Carolina and Clemson have followed EMU's lead to develop successful language and international business programs of their own.

The first national survey of the spread of LSP courses in the curriculum of four year colleges and universities by Uber Grosse (1985) showed that 62% of 450 responding institutions offered at least one course in foreign languages for specific purposes.

Other measures of the growth of ESP in the United States in the eighties include its growing presence in the curriculum in higher education, the rising number of presentations at the TESOL conference related to ESP, the expansion of American publishers' booklists in ESP, and the increasing number of ESP articles published in professional journals.

Future Trends in ESP in America

In materials development for ESP, the British still dominate with the innovative quality of their texts and videotape series, although publishers such as Prentice-Hall have worked to expand their offerings in the field over the past three years.

Predictably, text offerings for the American market will continue to increase as interest in ESP expands in the 1990's.

A decade ago, Brumfit (1977) recommended that ESP teachers look beyond political and commercial requirements toward genuine educational goals. ESP teachers and curriculum developers must must continue to take language function, register, learner purpose, text and the interaction process. Brumfit urges the profession to allow more open-ended work, to use language in more realistic simulations, to avoid becoming overprecise, too specialized. We should seek integration with and acceptance by the rest of the profession, rather than isolation and independence.

In conclusion, the present ESP movement is inextricably tied to current trends in second language education such as content-based instruction, the interactive, communicative classroom, a student-centered focus, the use of authentic materials, attention to language functions, register, discourse analysis, and extralinguistic context. The spectrum of what precisely is considered ESP will continue to expand to embrace English for Business, Health Professionals, Social Workers, Science and Technology, Academic Purposes, Study Skills, Teaching Assistants, Lawyers, Firefighters, Helicopter Pilots, and so forth!

The move toward applied language studies has revitalized the second language teaching profession with its response to learner needs. It continues to give a new and practical orientation to the profession as more and more teachers and students are drawn to the challenge of specialized language learning.

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